1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

CHAPTER TWO

THE HOMES OF THE LEPCHAS

i

Zongu is a roughly triangular portion of very mountainous land, approximately forty miles on each side, bounded on the south-east by the river Teesta, on the north-east by the river Talung and on the third side by the mountains south of Kinchenjunga. The land is excessively precipitous; the rivers are at about 2,000 feet above sea-level and the average height of the hills is about 12,000 feet; but the peaks rise to more than double that height, Kinchenjunga at the head of the Talung valley, which dominates the western horizon, being over 28,000 feet. Except for a few artificially levelled places there is probably not a hundred square yards of flat ground in the whole district; and the tracks are too steep and too uneven for it to be possible to employ mules, let alone horses; all travelling has to be done on foot, and all goods transported by human porterage.

The river valleys are hot, steamy and somewhat malarious, and consequently there are no houses right on the river, though the ground is used for raising subtropical plants; there are however occasional houses about 500 feet higher up. Most of the houses and cultivated land are between 3,500 feet and 7,500 feet above sea-level, a relatively narrow band above the two rivers, though occasionally fields are made at even higher altitudes. Above the cultivated land is the forest in which wild produce is gathered, a decreasing amount of hunting done, and to which the cattle are sent up to pasture in the winter months. Above the forest level comes first the rhododendron forest, and then the snows, rarely visited except by hunters searching either for ibex and musk-deer or for the wild aconite which forms the basis of their arrow poison.

The climate of the Talung valley is excessively wet, even for the Himalayas; it is only in the autumn months—from the end of September to the end of November—that there is no rain.

1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

776 be rubbed over the body. Some men also carry a little arrow poison in a bag fastened inside their clothes over the heart. The greater number of people however do not take any of these precautions.

For the Lepchas devils are rather similar to the witches in European folklore; they are malevolent but not necessarily particularly intelligent; and there are numerous stories of devils being fooled by fairly simple devices, just as the witch was fooled in the story of *Hansel and Gretel*. There is no belief at all in ghosts or *revenants*; should the simulacrum of a dead person be seen it would be a devil in disguise. But although many people told me of having heard or seen devils, I did not hear a single story of any one seeing the dead or absent.

vii

133 This then is the landscape in which the rest of the book is set. To the south the hills rise steeply to an invisible crest; to the north the ground descends precipitously to the hidden Talung river, and then rises opposite even more steeply; behind the fairly barren hills are the peaks of Siniolchi and its eastern neighbours, jagged black rock topped with gleaming snow. At the western end of the Talung valley rises the stupendous mass of Kinchenjunga and its neighbouring peaks, Gods and the home of Gods. To the east are the green hills of Sikkim, and beyond the ragged snow-mountains which mark the frontier of Tibet.

For the European the landscape is one of overwhelming beauty, spoilt only by the very considerable difficulty of travelling about, so rocky and precipitous is the land. The picture I should like to [137] convey is of a very steep and broken series of hillsides, except in small clefts nearly bare of big trees, but almost entirely covered with low growths of shrubs and saplings of various tints of green, flecked with patches of colour at some seasons; the yellow sweet-smelling daphne *edgeworthiana*, the blue hydrangea-like flower of *dichroa febrifuga*, the rich purple of the Sikkim rose. Here and there, scattered over the hillsides, are pieces of cleared and burned land, with the larger tree-trunks standing up lopped and charred; pieces of land placed in seemingly quite arbitrary positions, with large stretches of green between them. Down in the valley the ground appears slightly more cultivated; there are roughly terraced fields fenced with bamboo hurdles, and occasional small rectangles

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

000 "The Congress, which has refused office in six provinces where the party is in a position to form Ministries, observed a *hartal* to mark the inauguration of autonomy in the provinces.

"The *hartal* was observed in Calcutta by the closing of Hindu shops. A small minority of Moslem-owned shops were also closed.

"Public services continued as usual, but schools and offices under the control of the Calcutta Corporation were closed. No disturbances have been reported."

* * * * *

782 At almost the very moment when the Governor of Bengal
787 was administering the oath to his newly-appointed Ministers,
789 an old Lepcha woman was squatting on the ground in a remote valley in Sikkim, with an egg pressed against her forehead. This was the day of the *Cherim* ceremony, which is observed all over Sikkim twice in every year: once now, and again at the beginning of the winter. Its purpose is to find out what sickness is likely to trouble the village during the next few months and, since the Lepchas like to get as much benefit as possible out of any one celebration, also to keep
[887] away hail. Kahlyeu, a gentle old man of nearly eighty, had
[133] previously made a rough altar of the branches of trees. It
[487] faced up the valley in full sight of Kinchinjunga, the summit of which is only twenty miles away as the crow flies, but for
[137] poor toiling man a journey of many painful days along the roughest of paths, and through thick rhododendron forest, to
787 the lower slopes alone. On his roughly constructed altar
789 Kahlyeu now put a large brass tray in which were seven
778 cones of butter, four eggs (some said it should have been
782 three), one rupee, three small butter-lamps and a Tibetan
[285 415] ceremonial scarf. The tray was placed on top of a plaited bamboo winnowing-tray, on which was spread a piece of red cotton cloth. All this was an offering to the spirits who dwell
[776] in the mountain, which the local people know only as Konchen. Before the eggs were placed in position Pom-ri, the old woman who was making the offering, placed each in

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

888 at us with his rheumy eyes. His brain was too far gone to take in much of what was said and after making a remark, which was a sinister meaningless croak rather than human speech, he would totter off again to add a few more turns to his credit. He always reminded me of a desiccated old colonel: perhaps in some previous incarnation he had snored away long hours in some comfortable London club. Anyhow, I like to think so.

136 Lingtem Monastery has no permanent inmates. It does, however, harbour large colonies of rats and fleas. I thought at first that the nightly scufflings might be some form of psychic disturbance; and as for the fleas, once one had been thoroughly bitten they ceased to cause further annoyance.

133 The view from the monastery is, in my opinion, unparalleled anywhere in the Himalaya. The building faces due north, and directly in front of us, on the far side of the river, was a splendidly wooded ridge, the top of which was still under snow when we first arrived. Away to the left we had an uninterrupted view of the Kinchinjunga peaks, with the top of Seniolchum just visible a little to one side. This in itself was a sufficiently remarkable sight: but away to the right we also had a clear view of all the peaks forming the boundary between Sikkim and Tibet. In the centre of those was Pau-hunri, here called Nahrem Hlo, and thought [823] to be the loom of Nazong Nyu, a mythical personage who appears in many Lepcha stories.

[788] Outside the monastery was a row of prayer-flags, and a 351 number of small prayer-drums had been let into one of the walls. These could be turned by the pious whenever they circled round the building. A little below was a small bamboo grove, which contained one particularly handsome tree, which I would sometimes watch for hours at a stretch, [322] especially when the weather was stormy. Why, I wondered, 137 do we use the wood of this most beautiful of all trees to make the most hideous of all furniture? The Lepcha uses a great deal of bamboo in one way and another, but in his hands the finished product never looks shoddy and ugly. On

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

windy days my favourite tree would bend and sway with incredible grace: it reminded me of some frail craft riding a stormy sea.

When we first arrived the hillsides were covered with yellow daphne, the bark of which is used to make paper. There were also a number of flowering apricots, orange trees, and ferns of every description, including the huge umbrella-like tree-fern, the pith of which can be made into spirit. Rather strangely, for Sikkim is famous for its flora, we found no flowers, but the undergrowth was thick with wormwood, which saturated the air with its pleasantly bitter scent.

According to the Lepcha dictionary the word Lingtem means "a mixture of slope and level: to be out of the perpendicular, to incline, to have leaning outwards." The place is all of these, except that the amount of level ground is negligible; and it was not possible to go more than a hundred yards or so in any direction without going either steeply up or down hill. The lowest and highest houses in the village were not more than a mile apart; but to go from one to the other involved a climb of well over fifteen hundred feet.

There were altogether thirty-three houses in Lingtem, and a total population of one hundred and seventy-nine souls. These thirty-three houses were spread about over several square miles of country, and in no particular spot were more than three or four grouped together. The grouping was entirely haphazard and in no way based upon relationships: a man might be at one end of the village, his brother a mile away. There was no attempt at planning; the village had just grown up like this. Additional houses would be built on any suitable site: the proximity of relations was of less importance than the selection of a spot that was free from evil influences. The monastery was situated in roughly the centre. In addition to its ordinary function as a place of worship, it served also as a village club. Twice every month there would be religious festivals, when anything up to

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

the change has been effected nothing can be done to alter it back.

Chodu, more than any other Lepcha I have ever met, conformed in appearance with the popular conception of these people as "Elves of the forest"; but actually his gnome-like appearance was somewhat deceptive. He was so pre-occupied with sex, more even than the average Lepcha, that we had already christened him "the dirty Reverend" before we knew his proper name; and under this title he appears in all my notes. When he found that we were fond of flowers he used often to bring in great armfuls of purple *Dendrobium* orchids, flowers that in England would have cost at least a shilling for a single bloom; and on these occasions our otherwise severely simple living-room would assume the appearance of a popular actress's dressing-room. His duties as a Ka-Ne brought him almost daily to the monastery, when he would come tiptoeing into the bedroom to change the water on the altar. A very likeable person and full of fun.

* * * * *

The *Chötembu*, who was otherwise known as Lumbar, was fifty-two. Grey-haired and jolly, his rather peculiar goitre gave the impression of a roll of fat all round his neck. His origin was somewhat obscure, for he appears to have been what our interpreter described as the "blasted son" of a Tibetan. He can neither read nor write, and says he has never exercised his prerogative to beat his fellows. His first wife, now forty-seven, is a daughter of Pom-Ri, now the wife of the second Dorje Lopön. After ten years of married life his wife, since she had borne him no child, urged him to marry again; this he did, and although his second wife has given him two children he still remains faithful to the first. The two women live in separate houses, but there is no question of their not getting on together. The first lives alone in a cattle-shed because she likes to get away by herself at times, and finds it irksome to be always in a house full of people and noise. Chötembu divides his time between the

7: Hooker D-5 (1849-1851) 1854
AK5 Lepcha AK5

Dorjiling: from its summit Chumulari (23,929 feet) is seen to the north-east, at eighty-four miles distance, rearing its head as a great rounded mass over the snowy Chola range, out of which it appears to rise, although in reality lying forty miles beyond;—so deceptive is the perspective of snowy mountains. To the north-west again, at upwards of 100 miles distance, a beautiful group of snowy mountains rises above the black Singalelah range, the chief being, perhaps, as high as Kinchinjunga, from which it is fully eighty miles distant to the westward; and between them no mountain of considerable altitude intervenes; the Nepalese Himalaya in that direction sinking remarkably towards the Arun river, which there enters Nepal from Tibet.

The top of Sinchul is a favourite excursion from Dorjiling, being very easy of access, and the path abounding in rare and beautiful plants, and passing through magnificent forests of oak, magnolia, and rhododendron; while the summit, besides embracing this splendid view of the snowy range over the Dorjiling spur in the foreground, commands also the plains of India, with the courses of the Teesta, Mahanuddee, Balasun and Mechi rivers. In the months of April and May, when the magnolias and rhododendrons are in blossom, the gorgeous vegetation is, in some respects, not to be surpassed by anything in the tropics; but the effect is much marred by the prevailing gloom of the weather. The white-flowered magnolia (*M. excelsa*, Wall,) forms a predominant tree at 7000 to 8000 feet; and in 1848 it blossomed so profusely, that the forests on the broad flanks of Sinchul, and other mountains of that elevation, appeared as if sprinkled with snow. The purple-flowered kind again (*M. Campbellii*) hardly occurs below 8000 feet, and forms an immense, but very ugly, black-barked, sparingly branched

7: Hooker D-5 (1849-1851) 1854
AK5 Lepcha AK5

137 tree, leafless in winter and also during the flowering season, when it puts forth from the ends of its branches great rose-purple cup-shaped flowers, whose fleshy petals strew the ground. On its branches, and on those of oaks and laurels, *Rhododendron Dalhousiæ* grows epiphytically, a slender shrub, bearing from three to six white lemon-scented bells, four and a half inches long and as many broad, at the end of each branch. In the same woods the scarlet rhododendron (*R. arboreum*) is very scarce, and is outvied by the great *R. argenteum*, which grows as a tree forty feet high, with magnificent leaves twelve to fifteen inches long, deep green, wrinkled above and silvery below, while the flowers are as large as those of *R. Dalhousiæ*, and grow more in a cluster. I know nothing of the kind that exceeds in beauty the flowering branch of *R. argenteum*, with its wide spreading foliage and glorious mass of flowers.

Oaks, laurels, maples, birch, chesnut, hydrangea, a species of fig (which is found on the very summit), and three Chinese and Japanese genera, are the principal features of the forest; the common bushes being *Aucuba*, *Skimmia*, and the curious *Helwingia*, which bears little clusters of flowers on the centre of the leaf, like butcher's-broom. In spring immense broad-leaved arums spring up, with green or purple-striped hoods, that end in tail-like threads, eighteen inches long, which lie along the ground; and there are various kinds of *Convallaria*, *Paris*, *Begonia*, and other beautiful flowering herbs. Nearly thirty ferns may be gathered on this excursion, including many of great beauty and rarity, but the tree-fern does not ascend so high. Grasses are very rare in these woods, excepting the dwarf bamboo, now cultivated in the open air in England.

000 Before proceeding to narrate my different expeditions into

7: Hooker D-5 (1849-1851) 1854
AK5 Lepcha AK5

Some[1] are supposed to be antidotes against [752]
poison, and hence fetch an enormous price; they are of a 415
peculiar wood, rarer and paler-coloured. I have paid a [435]
guinea for one such, hardly different from the common
sort, which cost but 4*d.* or 6*d.* MM. Huc and Gabet
graphically allude to this circumstance, when wishing to
purchase cups at Lhassa, where their price is higher, as
they are all imported from the Himalaya. The knots from
which they are formed, are produced on the roots of oaks,
maples, and other mountain forest trees, by a parasitical [87]●
plant, known to botanists as *Balanophora*.

Their intoxicating drink, which seems more to excite 273
than to debauch the mind, is partially fermented Murwa
grain (*Eleusine Coracana*). Spirits are rather too strong
to be relished raw, and when a glass of wine is given to
one of a party, he sips it, and hands it round to all the
rest. A long bamboo flute, with four or six burnt holes 534
far below the mouth-hole, is the only musical instrument
I have seen in use among them. When travelling, and the 517
fatigues of the day are over, the Lepchas will sit for hours
chatting, telling stories, singing in a monotonous tone,
or blowing this flute. I have often listened with real 533
pleasure to the simple music of this rude instrument; its
low and sweet tones are singularly Æolian, as are the
airs usually played, which fall by octaves: it seems to
harmonize with the solitude of their primæval forests, and
he must have a dull ear who cannot draw from it the
indication of a contented mind, whether he may relish its
soft musical notes or not. Though always equipped for 224
the chase, I fancy the Lepcha is no great sportsman;
there is little to be pursued in this region, and he is not
driven by necessity to follow what there is.

Their marriages are contracted in childhood, and the 583
wife purchased by money, or by service rendered to the 582

[1] [i.e., wooden cups.-Analyst]

539 *Fŏa-rŏa-lĭń kar-gok go-ma zom-na-yań*
Ar-tan-tsam bŭt dok ă-tim-bu lăt nom-mĭ
Chań-sa-li ka-sok go ma-f'ăn na-yań
Mar-ño bŭu uń ńot ă-tim-bu lăt nom-mĭ.

Though I ate not the *fŏa-rŏa-lĭń* wild plantain. [1])
I feel great pain in my *ar-tan-tsam* liver.
Though I took not the wild *chan-sa-li* yam [2])
I am burned up with a fiery thirst.

V.

Ee Ye!
Săk-la ma-run-ne lońk la ma-run-ne
Mĭt tan-gum nom-f'om dă-par-ño soń-ńa
Kyoń-ra-lo lat ă-re re favi-lă yo
Ar-tan-tsam byat la-kań kyĭń la yo ma.

Ee Ye!
I feel very sad.
Listen O maidens behind! (respected) as *dă-par* great-(mothers
I feel this *kyoń-ra-lo* heart (of mine)
Is pierced through and my *ar-tan-tsam* breath [3]) is chill.

Ee Ye!
Go-roń ño! Săk la ma-run-ne
S'er f'ao-di nuk-bo ram ho nun o
Om kiń-tsam s'u noń-ńan go dun bo che
Sak-la ma-run-ne lońk la ma-run-ne

Ee Ye!
I feel very sad.
O Head-Father spirit, creator of *S'er* fate.
Tell me what is my *Om* destiny!
I feel very sad!

Ee Ye!
S'i-mĭn-mi kup gi-par-noń ńin kup ao-lo noń
Ki-dak tsam-ga-non nan-roń
S'u mat noń ńań go yoń s'ŭ diń ma ó
Săk la ma-run-ne lońk la ma-run ne.

Ee Ye!
I (am only) a *S'i-ruan-mi* boy,
A *gi-par-noń* youngster. I implore you humbly standing
Why have you given me this *ao-lo-non* and *tsam-la-non* (sorrow
I feel very sad.

VI.

Fok-tsom-mon na yon
Kiń tsom vań na s'en
Mi-f'ik-mo s'u yĭń
Kiń tsom vań na len
Duk-mar-bŭu nom f'at
Tuk-ta-li Nă-noń ño.
Zăm-ao-li Fa-duń f'iń
A-yu ru-ma ó
Kyoń-ra-lo lat dok
Ar-s'i ban s'u yĭ
Z'em ta-f'i s'u yĭ
Gi-par-vim s'u da.

O you with the flowing hair!
O fair one with the neat parted hair!
Why have you *mi-f'ik-mo* charmed me so?
You fair one with the neat parted hair!
O old great grandmother *Tuk-ta-li Nă-noń*
You *duk-mar-bŭu* joiner of our breath
O old great grandfather *Zam-ao-li* lord *Fa-duń*
Praise be to your namee!
(But) why have you *ar-s'i-ban* created me?
Why have you *z'em-ta-mi* created me?
Why have you *gi-par-vim* created me?
To suffer such heart-breaking sorrow?

The following seems a figurative declaration of affection by a youth of the valley the Singbali-river towards a girl of the Kirungpata-glen.

---

[222] [137] [1]) *Kar-gok* is the wild plantain (*Musa* sp.). It is full of large sharply jagged and irritant seeds. The cultivated plantain *Kar-duń* is seedless.

[2]) *Ka-sok* is a hairy round wild yam of large size, which grows near the surface of the ground, but its tubers cause intense thirst. Other wild yams found in Sikhim are *Sa-um-buk*, *Sań-gol-buk* and *Sa-li-buk* (?) probably the *Chań-sa-li* of text.

[3]) Literally „Lungs".

11:Hermanns M-5 (1951)1954
AK5 Lepcha AK5

142
291
302

19. Lepcha grandmother with grandchildren

142
411
137
224

22. Lepcha hunter

[End Plate 8]

[End Plates 1-7 not processed]

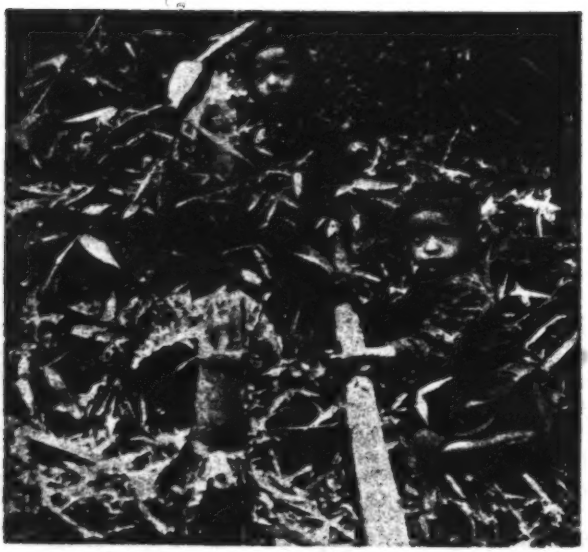
Fig. 20-21
see p. 61-62

11:Hermanns M-5 (1951)1954
AK5 Lepcha AK5

291
482
415
412
137
313

37. Lepcha grandmother cutting bamboo

142
291
302
137



38. Lepcha children

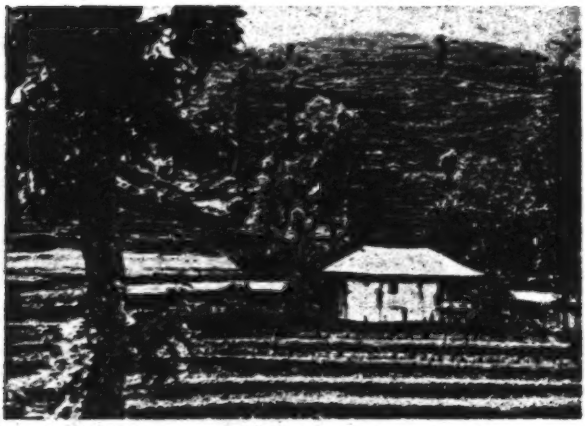
[End Plate 15]

11:Hermanns M-5 (1951)1954
AK5 Lepcha AK5

294
412
313

39. Lepcha girl cutting bamboo

241
133
343
137



40. Cultivations of the Rai

[End Plate 16]